

STORMS

OLD SALTS STILL REMEMBER THE PORTLAND GALE

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Still green in the memory of local seafarers is the dramatic story of the sinking of the 291-foot sidewheeler, the PORTLAND. She went down with the loss of all hands in the 1898 gale. From Nantucket to Bangor, mates, they still speak of "the PORTLAND gale."

Trim in its white and gold paint, the PORTLAND, despite storm warnings, cast off the Saturday after Thanksgiving, 1898. Aboard, and hoping to make Portland ahead of the blow, were many Maine families who had spent the holiday in Boston. Spectators watched the sidewheeler vanish down the channel into a wall of snow. She was churning her way just beyond Thatcher Island when the gale struck. All night her paddle wheels thrashed helplessly in the mountainous seas that battered her superstructure, and she was driven southward in the freezing weather and swirling snow. Survivors of some of the 141 vessels that foundered in that gale said later it was impossible to see across the deck, and hard to breathe.

Came the gray dawn. On the tip of Cape Cod coast watchers could see the PORTLAND being buffeted around in angry seas just off the treacherous Peaked Hill Bar. As the day passed, the storm increased in intensity, and that night the ocean belched forth a sickening jetsam of trunks, chairs, mattresses, stateroom doors and barrels, which settled on the beach near Race Point. And then the bodies came in on the giant rollers. Here are the words of one surf watcher: "The bodies do not float as woodwork does, but the tide and waves push and roll them along the bottom until they reach shallow water, when they get into the undertow and are tossed up on the beach." According to Historian Edward Rowe Snow, the watches found on the dead had stopped at 9:15.

What, meanwhile, had happened to the PORTLAND? "For years," Time Magazine, reported, "no one could find the sunken hull. Other wreckage was found miles away. Mooncussers, scrabbling among the jetsam, found a piece of cabin from the PENTAGOET, another steamer lost without trace. Had the ships rammed each other? Or had the PORTLAND hit the bar? Or had she clawed off shore only to break up under the terrible pounding?

"In 1945, the hull was found. It was lying, sanded in, among huge boulders some four miles off shore and 145 feet down. Her superstructure swept away, she had gone down like a sounding lead in deep water."

Since 1908, surviving relatives of the PORTLAND'S dead list gathered each year to commemorate the anniversary. The last time they sat on fish boxes in the steamer shed on Boston's India Wharf and heard Mr. Snow recount the grim tale. They hear for the last time the roll call read of the PORTLAND'S dead. As each name was called, survivors threw flowers on the ebbing tide to the music of "Rock of Ages," played on a zither. It was the 50th anniversary.